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AUTHOR Agnew, Christopher R.; Newton, James W.
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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to examine whether faculty members in psychology departments are objective and impartial in responding to requests for information to benefit students who may be potential applicants for admission to graduate study or whether faculty members are influenced by indications of the requestor's status in ways that may restrict access to information for some students. To examine this issue, 228 letters were mailed out to randomly selected professors of psychology at institutions throughout the United States, with 92 responses received. The content of each letter was the same: a request for materials about the professor's current area of research interest to be made available to interested students and faculty and especially to students contemplating further study in psychology. A 2x2x2 factorial design was used, with factors varying by the status of the letter recipient's (high=professor, low=student), the status of the letter recipient's institution (high or low), and the status of the letter itself (high=letterhead, low=plain paper). The findings revealed that the frequency of cooperative responses was significantly lower (23%) for low-status (student) senders using high-status (departmental stationery) letters than in any other combination of conditions (average response rate=45%), suggesting that attempts to enhance student status by invoking institutional affiliation may be counterproductive when seeking voluntary cooperation from academics. (NB)

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Status and Cooperation:
Faculty Responsiveness to Student Inquiries

Christopher R. Agnew

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

James W. Newton

San Francisco State University

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Abstract

When information is requested for the benefit of students contemplating application for graduate study in psychology, do faculty members respond impartially, or is cooperation influenced by elements of status? We sent letters of inquiry to 228 faculty throughout the United States, varying the status (high or low) of the sender, of the letter itself, and of the recipient's institution. The frequency of cooperative responses was significantly lower (23%) for low-status (student) senders using high-status (departmental stationary) letters than in any other combination of conditions (average response rate = 45%). Evidently, attempts to enhance student status by invoking institutional affiliation can be counterproductive when seeking voluntary cooperation from academics.

Status and Cooperation:
Faculty Responsiveness to Student Inquiries

Are faculty members in psychology departments objective and impartial in responding to requests for information to benefit students who may be potential applicants for admission to graduate study, or are faculty influenced by indications of the requestor's status in ways that may restrict access to information for some students? Does the prestige of an academic institution affect a faculty member's readiness to respond to a request for information from students? We conducted a simple test of faculty responsiveness to letters of inquiry in which three factors -- the sender (faculty or student), the letter, and the recipient's institution -- were identified as high or low in status. Our dependent measure was the frequency of cooperative responses.

Several previous studies have used mail correspondence to assess cooperation. Milgram, Mann, and Harter (1965) devised the "lost letter technique" to measure, by means of completion of a cooperative task, the attitudes of community members toward the addressee of a letter which had been apparently lost on its way to a mailbox. Individuals who found such a letter had to decide whether to cooperate -- i.e., to mail the letter themselves -- to disregard it, or to destroy it. Gasparikova-Krasnec and Ging (1987) investigated professional cooperation among psychological researchers by requesting, through a letter, information necessary to conduct an experimental replication. The measurement of cooperation was the response rate to the letter. This approach differs from the lost letter technique in that the letter requesting replication materials was mailed directly to the researchers. The letter content itself was standardized, but the sex and education level of the requestor (undergraduate, graduate, or PhD) were varied. Interestingly, no significant differences in the frequency of responses for either the sex or education level, or their interactions, was found. The authors concluded that there is a considerable amount of professional cooperation among psychologists regarding replication

information, and that the probability of cooperation was not influenced by the education level or gender of the letter sender.

The study reported here drew on this tradition of using mail correspondence to evaluate cooperative responses, but with a very different basis for prediction: the high or low status of the sender, of the letter, and of the recipient's institution. We expected a higher response (cooperation) rate to the letter from the professor (a peer, of equal high status) than to the letter from the student (not a peer, of lower status). Furthermore, we predicted a higher response (cooperation) rate to the high-status letters, regardless of the sender's status. Two competing hypotheses were offered regarding the possible effects of the recipient's institutional status. One hypothesis held that cooperation would be greater from individuals affiliated with high-status institutions because of the increased availability of support staff at such institutions to assist faculty in the fulfillment of voluminous written requests. On the other hand, it was hypothesized that cooperation would be greater from individuals affiliated with low-status institutions because of an increased eagerness to respond to infrequent requests for materials.

Method

Sampling

A total of 240 letters were mailed out to randomly selected professors of psychology at institutions throughout the continental United States. The selection procedure is detailed below.

Procedure

The content of each letter was the same: a request for materials about the recipient's current area(s) of research interest, to be "made available to interested students and faculty....[and] especially useful to students who are contemplating further study in psychology." The recipients were asked to send

a basic summation of their current research, an abstract, or a paper recently presented at a professional conference. If not involved in any research, the recipient was asked to notify the sender of that fact. A return date deadline of about one month was implied in the letter.

A 2 x 2 x 2 factorial design was used. The three factors were: 1) the status of the letter sender (high = professor, low = student); 2) the status of the letter recipient's institution (high or low, as derived from the 1989 edition of The Gourman Report); and, 3) the status of the letter itself (high = letterhead, low = plain paper). In each of the eight conditions, thirty letters were sent.

Half of the letters were sent from a professor (high-status sender) and the other half from a graduate student (low-status sender). The status of the letter recipient's institution was also varied. The recipients of the letters were randomly chosen from among the full professors at graduate psychology programs of two types: schools ranked among the best nationally in graduate psychology, as listed in a respected current ratings book of graduate programs (Gourman, 1989), and schools not listed.

Finally, the "letter status" was varied to determine if obvious sender affiliation with an institution, as evidenced by use of departmental letterhead, would significantly affect recipient response (cooperation) rate. Accordingly, half of the letters were sent on departmental letterhead, with machine postage, and half of the letters were sent on plain white stationary, with regular first-class postage stamps.

To determine to which geographic areas the letters should be sent, and in what proportions, national geographic breakdown criteria developed by the U.S. Bureau of the Census were used in a slightly altered format. The Census Bureau divides the continental United States into nine regions. We combined some regions to form seven geographic regions. The number of high-status institutions contained within each of these seven regions was calculated. The number of letters sent to each region was proportional to the percentage of

high-status institutions located in that national region. Then, an equal number of letters to low-status institutions in that region was prepared.

Results

Of the 240 letters originally mailed, 12 letters were returned by the post office as undeliverable, yielding an effective N of 228. A total of 92 responses were received, an overall response rate of 40.35% for all eight conditions. Table 1 shows the individual response rate for each condition.

Table 1: Response Rate By Condition

		HIGH-STATUS INSTITUTION	LOW-STATUS INSTITUTION
HIGH-STATUS SENDER	HIGH-STATUS LETTER	15 (50.00%) (n = 30)	11 (36.66%) (n = 30)
	LOW-STATUS LETTER	14 (46.66%) (n = 30)	14 (46.66%) (n = 30)
LOW-STATUS SENDER	HIGH-STATUS LETTER	6 (25.00%) (n = 24)	6 (21.42%) (n = 28)
	LOW-STATUS LETTER	12 (46.15%) (n = 26)	14 (46.66%) (n = 30)

Chi-square analyses revealed that the status of the letter sender and the status of the letter itself significantly affected the rate of response from professors (X^2= 8.517, df = 3, $p < .05$). The institutional status of the letter recipients did not have a significant effect on response rate. More replies were received by the high-status sender than the low-status sender (45.00% response rate vs. 35.18% response rate). Interestingly, the lowest percentage of replies was elicited by a low-status sender using high-status letterhead (23.07%); this is approximately half the response rate obtained by the same low-status sender using low-status plain paper stationary (46.42%).

Discussion

The results support our hypothesis that a low-status individual is relatively less likely to receive cooperation than a high-status individual. However, a low-status individual is just as likely as a high-status individual to receive cooperation when the request is made in a fashion commensurate with the requestor's status. That is, a high-status individual was just as likely to cooperate with a request from a low-status individual when the low-status individual made the request on low-status plain paper stationary, as opposed to high-status letterhead. It appears that a discrepancy between the status of the sender and the status of the instrument used by the sender to request cooperation may result in lack of cooperation. From a student's pragmatic perspective, these results suggest that it is wiser to request information from faculty as an individual using plain paper than to risk the appearance of impropriety by using departmental letterhead to invoke one's institutional affiliation.

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Author Notes

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Results of additional analyses not reported in this paper may be obtained by contacting the first author. Correspondence should be addressed to: Christopher Agnew, Department of Psychology, Campus Box # 3270, Davie Hall, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27599.